

Middling Culture 1560–1660

What sort of furniture did people in the middle of early modern society own?

We are delighted to let Society members know about a new project at the universities of Kent, Birmingham and King's College London, and hope you may want to get involved? Middling Culture is a three-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It aims to transform our understanding of how reading, writing, and material culture fitted into the everyday lives of England's 'middling' sort – neither the very rich nor the very poor – between around 1560 and 1660. We know a great deal about elite culture, but much less about circumstances and experience in the middle of the social scale. The people we are interested in are the literate, urban households whose members engaged with a variety of cultural forms for work and leisure, and within civic, religious and social networks. Some of them are familiar names, like William Shakespeare for instance, but many others are known only through fragmentary records and/or the objects they left behind. We want to start to tell their stories.

One of the reasons we know so little about the cultural lives of these households is because the evidence we need to explore them is cared for by unconnected institutions – libraries, archives, online repositories and museums, as well as private collections. This makes it hard for us to see the connections between the textual, visual and material things that were made in these

houses, the things these men and women bought as entertainment, possessions or decoration, and how the material forms of middling culture extended beyond the household, connecting domestic experience with other social environments and practices. We need to find evidence for the things they experienced in these domestic, civic and religious spaces.

Over the next three years, we will be working with two strands of evidence: the texts these people produced and consumed, such as the household, personal and urban administrative archives to which they groups contributed – accounts, recipe books, pamphlets etc; and, most importantly for RFS members, their material culture: the clothing and personal objects with which they were associated, and the domestic, religious and civic buildings (including their architecture, decoration and of course furniture), which they inhabited.

Analysed together, this information will allow us to reconstruct the full range of these households' cultures, and the levels of skill and expertise involved in their production. In addition to creating educational resources for schools and museums, our work will allow us to recreate a specific example of a middling lifestyle, by digitally modelling a period room, complete with the sounds, lighting and furniture of the time. This digital modelling will offer another way to think 'inside' the material and textual lives of the middling sort.

So, we need your help! Identifying elite furniture is relatively straightforward because it tends to have good provenance, but finding middling things is harder. One



The long table in the hall at Blakesley Hall, Yardley, Birmingham. Made for this space c. 1620

of the things the project aims to do is to find ways of identifying what the possessions of middling people looked like, so at the moment there are no firm answers to how sophisticated or highly decorated these objects are likely to be – we can only work that out by discussing it. Do you know of objects which you think might have belonged to this group? If you do then please get it touch – we would love to hear from you.

You can find out more about the project here: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/middling-culture/>, on our blog: <https://middlingculture.com/blog/> and on Twitter: @MiddlingCulture

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